

The church at Galatia had, as we say, been *got at*. Their faith in Christ and in what Christ has done for them, had been undermined. Alongside the Docetics and the Gnostics and other heretics who, in the early days, attached themselves to apostolic Christianity, there were also the Judaisers, those who thought that the followers of Christ, even if gentiles, should be obliged to follow the Torah, the Law of Moses.

That such a thing should happen is not surprising, given that Christianity was born from Judaism and is the fulfilment of that story of salvation. Indeed, we can read earlier in the epistle to the Galatians, as well as in the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 15], how the church at Jerusalem had to confront this controversy in a council, at which the apostles were present, including St Paul. It was at that council that Paul was able to report his own experience, especially the incontrovertible fact, that without the practice of the Law, through their faith, gentile believers had been baptised and had received the Holy Spirit, and had plainly manifested the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is, no doubt, very hard to grasp real change. To have been brought up in a tradition of faith and belief, to have known a culture and to have lived that life, and then to have realised that the situation, the whole meaning of your life, has been changed, must be a profound spiritual shock! There is no other word for it. But that is what the apostles and disciples of Christ had experienced because of His death and resurrection. The old way, under the Torah of Moses, was now, not so much obsolete but brought to completion; it had served its purpose but had become something better. Whereas the Law was for this life - and indeed, for the Jews alone - the Gospel was Eternal Life for all. Whereas before, Circumcision, a mark and token borne on the flesh of Israel's sons, sealed the covenant, cut off and separated the children of Abraham, so now, Baptism and the anointing of the Spirit, brought the soul in Christ through death and rebirth into the kingdom of God, where, even now, they knew the first fruits of eternal life. That,

by the way, is the meaning of the gospel and the central mystery of the Christian faith.

Paul reminds the Galatian Christians that he no longer glories in the former things as he used to do. He says that it matters not at all whether the body has or has not, the token of circumcision: what use is that for Christians; what can it possibly add to their spiritual status before God? Rather, what he glories in now is not the flesh at all, but the Cross of Christ, for in dying with Christ he has been reborn into a new life, and so have they, the Galatians. And in an ironic twist he adds that he bears on his body the marks of Christ: not those that Abraham of old was commanded to make, but the scars of the many stripes and beatings he had received for preaching Christ and His gospel. This for him was the visible evidence; these were the tokens in the flesh that he belonged to Christ. The Galatian Christians, Paul insists, have to understand this; there can be no compromise with the world in this matter: the true Israel of God walks now by this rule. Circumcision and uncircumcision henceforth count for nothing; the flesh, that is the world and all worldly standards, bear no comparison with the knowledge of Christ and the mystery of becoming what he calls, a *new creation*.

As I have said, previously, the rewards of the religious life under the Old Testament were given in this life. The well-being of Israel and the blessings enjoyed by the Jewish people, came from obedience and faithfulness to the Old Covenant. But after the return from the Exile in Babylon, sadly there developed the *pharisee-mind* that could glory in its imagined righteous perfection, the exclusion and separation from the unrighteous, the gentile, the Samaritan, the sinner. But this is not spiritual: this is worldly, for it is grounded in the passions of the fallen soul. Indeed, Paul himself, as Saul of Tarsus, once prided himself on this heritage: *If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.* [Philippians 3:4-7]

We need not be surprised, we need not trouble ourselves over the way in which so much religion has become worldly throughout human history. Religion itself is manifested through the world, through *the flesh*; can we be surprised when that too is prone to so many temptations, for people are naturally religious in the way they work; even atheists are religious animals in much of their behaviour, their rituals, their obsessions. The Devil quite likes religion; he doesn't mind people being religious, after all, there are heretical opinions with which to tempt vulnerable souls; there is the whole world of hypocrisy and that easy slide into judging the lives of others, when misguided by the passion of Pride: the opportunities for being led into temptation are endless!

We heard the parable of the *Rich Fool* today. We know the story well and we understand what it teaches about seeking communion with God as the highest priority of our existence. It is important, though, if we are to understand this parable, that we read it in context. Earlier in the chapter Our Lord has just had an encounter with a man in the crowd who addresses Him as *teacher*, that is, *Rabbi*, and asks that He tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. And Christ refuses the request! You see! God always responds to our prayers, and sometimes the answer is *No!* Rabbis, in Israel would, indeed, act as arbiters and judges in family disputes of this kind, being experts in the Law. Perhaps the other brother, the elder who holds the inheritance, wants to keep the property intact and keep the family together, whilst the younger one here feels he is entitled to his share so that he might live apart. We don't know.

Christ, though, keeps his distance, as we see Him address the man formally in turn as, *Ανθρωπε*, that is, *Man*, or as we might say in English, *Sir*. You will recall that Christ even addresses His own mother with the same formality at the wedding at Cana in St John's gospel, as he starts out on His saving mission and ministry, and begins to separate Himself from the local, domestic world into which He had been born. Perhaps He sees through the man's request; perhaps He sees into the heart and sees into the heart of the matter: that this man is motivated by selfish desires; he is not

seeking first the kingdom of God, but has worldly advantage as his priority. So refusing the request he relates, instead, the parable of the Rich Fool.

Let us ask ourselves, therefore, are we of the old creation or of the new? Do we think we can bring the old baggage with us, and all those marks and scars and tokens, those souvenirs of the old way of life: the world, the flesh and the devil, that we were supposed to have dumped when we were baptised? We might not be Jewish converts to Christ, or gentiles like the Galatians who had been told by in-comers that they must also follow Jewish custom, even though Paul had brought them to the knowledge of Christ. We might be very firm in our Orthodoxy, but we know how easy it is to let go of the life in the Spirit and to feel, once again, the dead weight of the old Adam; for our heart to lose its centre on Christ and become distracted by *the flesh*, as Paul might say.

Our way in Christ finds us, at present, at the start of the Nativity Fast; a date in our calendar inviting us to take up the Cross and follow along the ascetic path for a while: not the martyrdom blood, not the vocation of the monastic life, and not even as strict as the Great Fast. But in as much as grace has given us strength, we withdraw for a while from that nagging concupiscence, that constant desire that the world imagines to be a natural freedom but is, in fact, unnatural, to our true nature, the New Creation, our refashioning in Christ. Let us at least be very careful in this present season, especially in the way we relate to our neighbours, our colleagues and all around us at this time. As St Peter writes, *For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles... In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.* [1Pet.4:3-5]

As a new creation, as the people who live the mystery of the gospel, we shall celebrate the Nativity from the eve of the Feast, not before. For we are not preparing to celebrate the winter equinox, nor the pagan Saturnalia, nor preparing to offer those sacrifices demanded by the great god of Commerce! Let us show

instead that, unlike those Galatians, we have not been *got at*; that the world, the flesh and devil have not been invited into our lives once again. For we glory in the Cross and bear upon our souls - and on our bodies too, if need be, the marks of Jesus.